



40 66 You can push for legislative action. 99

— John Podolinsky, Montana
DEQ Asbestos Control Program

Concerned residents, lawmakers take aim at asbestos problem

By SONJA LEE
Tribune Staff Writer

Montana homeowners and contractors with worries about asbestos-contaminated Zonolite insulation may look to the 2005 Legislature for help.

Some want financial assistance with costs of removing contaminated insulation, while others want better enforcement of laws designed to prevent exposure to the asbestos.

Two Great Falls lawmakers said last week that they plan to track the issue. And John Podolinsky, air quality specialist with the Montana DEQ Asbestos Control Pro-

gram, urged residents to voice their concerns. "You can push for legislative action," he said.

The state has drawn national attention for asbestos problems since disclosure five years ago that much of the town of Libby was contaminated with asbestos from a vermiculite mine that once operated there.

Libby is now a federal Superfund site where some \$180 million will be spent cleaning land and homes. But few programs exist to help the potentially thousands of homeowners

Microscopic view
of tremolite asbestos



See ASBESTOS, 3A

Asbestos: Montana 10 times norm for mesothelioma

FROM 1A

elsewhere in the state whose dwellings were built more than 50 years ago, at a time when Zonolite insulation made from contaminated Libby ore was commonly used.

Much of that insulation was made in Great Falls at the now-defunct Robinson Insulation Co.

In an eight-page special report published last week, the Great Falls Tribune detailed problems associated with the insulation, including deaths of several workers from the Robinson plant and illness among their family members who were exposed to dust on the workers' clothing.

The Tribune also reported that nearly 80 percent of the state's contractors do not comply with existing rules for identifying and handling asbestos-containing materials, and many are unaware of the risks.

About 60 people attended a public forum at the newspaper last week, seeking answers to their questions about asbestos issues.

Several were homeowners from across northcentral Montana who wanted to know where to get more information or financial help dealing with Zonolite insulation.

Left alone, the insulation is not a health risk. But it is easy to disturb the insulation, which could free asbestos fibers into the air. Inhaling the fibers creates risk for asbestos-related lung diseases, although the risks vary by individual and symptoms take as long as 30 years to develop.

Even homeowners who don't go into their attics could face risks if



TRIBUNE PHOTO BY KATIE OYAN

Michael Spence, state medical officer with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, speaks to the roughly 60 people who attended a public forum on asbestos issues at the Great Falls Tribune last week.

the loose, fluffy insulation begins to seep through cracks in ceilings or walls of an aging home. Zonolite was commonly used in homes built during the 1930s and 1940s. That includes up to a third of homes in Great Falls, and potentially thousands of dwellings in the region and state.

Buck O'Brien, who put Zonolite insulation in his shop years ago, said he doesn't want his grandchildren exposed to a potentially harmful product. "You don't want that to trickle out through the light fixtures," he said.

Calling a consultant to test for asbestos and then removing the insulation can cost \$10,000 or more.

John Klinefelter with Klinefelter's Insulation, said he often re-insulates homes to help property owners reduce energy costs. He said he is surprised the Legislature hasn't done more to get the word out about regulations surrounding asbestos-containing materials.

"I think somebody has missed the ballgame on this trying to educate people," he said.

Sen. Don Ryan, D-Great Falls, said he hopes to talk with the Department of Environmental Quality about what their needs are to keep up with the asbestos issue. Rep. John Parker, D-Great Falls, did not attend the forum but said

last week that he, too, will track the issue.

Larry Alheim, environmental enforcement specialist with the DEQ, said the department has issued numerous warning letters to contractors who don't follow the rules. Those who continue to violate rules face fines, and enforcement actions are on the rise, he said.

In 2002 the department took two actions against contractors, leveling fines of \$9,516. This year, it handled four cases with fines totaling \$185,203. The 2003 violations were more serious, such as disregarding safe work practices, Alheim said.

The department also is working more closely with local government officials to identify noncompliance for general contractors, and Alheim said that, too, may lead to increased action.

Craig Barnes of Great Falls said he has Zonolite in his attic and there could be asbestos in his ceiling tiles. He has done electrical work that disturbed the insulation.

"My heart is pounding right now," Barnes said after listening to presentations from state health and environmental officials. Barnes said he doesn't want to gamble with his family's safety, but costs of testing for asbestos and having it removed are daunting.

"Is there any financial assistance available?" he said.

In most cases there isn't, said Podolinsky, the DEQ asbestos official.

Most insurance policies also don't cover replacing the insula-

tion, and some policies have exclusions for asbestos-containing materials.

Many at the Tuesday forum were concerned about the health risks associated with asbestos.

Howard Miller, who has been on oxygen for the past four years, retired from Grogan Robinson Lumber Co. in 1980. He helped carry bags of Zonolite and other materials made at Robinson Insulation, which was on River Drive on the same property as the lumber company.

Miller has not been diagnosed with asbestosis, but when he learned about the lung problems experienced by Robinson Insulation employees, red flags went up.

Phil Thompson, another former employee of Grogan Robinson Lumber Co., also spent time in the insulation plant. He has scarring on his lungs and is concerned. "I will get tested again," he vowed.

Michael Spence, state medical officer with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, said Montana has 10 times the rate of mesothelioma that there is in other areas based on population. Mesothelioma is a rare cancer of the lining of the chest or abdomen that most often is caused by asbestos exposure.

"We think it is because of the amount of asbestos in the state," Spence said.

Asbestosis is not cancer, but is a progressive disease of the lungs that makes breathing difficult.

Spence also said that a person who has asbestosis can lead a long and productive life. "The disease is many things to many people," he said.

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS

About 60 people attended a forum last week at the Great Falls Tribune, looking for answers to their questions about asbestos, Zonolite insulation and asbestos related illnesses. Here are some of their questions and the answers provided by a panel of state and area experts:

If I have a bag of old vermiculite that I still use for things like potting plants, what should I do?

It could contain asbestos if it was made from ore mined in Libby. The Libby mine closed in 1990. If you have Zonolite insulation in your attic and you do not use your attic, you can place the bag there. Make sure it is left undisturbed.

If you decide to get rid of the bag, you need to contact an asbestos contractor or a consultant, who can help you dispose of the materials legally. Consultants and contractors are available in Great Falls. The Department of Environmental Quality and the city of Great Falls both have lists of certified consultants and contractors.

Is asbestos still added to the taping used when doing Sheetrock work?

Generally not, but taping products with asbestos may be imported into the United States.

Those who are doing Sheetrock work can check with the store where the product was purchased. The store should provide a supplier phone number. Call the supplier and request a material safety data sheet, which

will list all the ingredients in the product.

Sheetrock often has a code on the back for quality assurance. You can call the phone number to find out if the Sheetrock contains asbestos.

Many stores now post signs stating that specific products, such as the tape, are "asbestos free."

Does a real estate agent have to disclose that a house has Zonolite insulation?

No. If a homeowner knows the house has materials containing asbestos and has had a consultant confirm that there is more than 1 percent asbestos, the homeowner must disclose that fact during the sale process.

If a homeowner has Zonolite insulation, for example, but has not had a consultant test to confirm that it contains asbestos, he or she does not have to disclose that the insulation is there.

In some cases a home inspector might note materials in a home that may contain asbestos, but many inspectors aren't qualified or certified to do asbestos inspections.

"It really is buyer beware," said John Podolinsky, air quality specialist with the Montana DEQ Asbestos Control Program.

How much can it cost to remove Zonolite insulation?

Removal can be very expensive. One expert said properly removing asbestos-containing

Zonolite from a home could cost between \$10,000 and \$15,000, although costs vary widely based on the size of the dwelling and the level of contamination.

Curt Bedwell, owner of Quality Urethane, a Great Falls company certified to remove asbestos-containing materials, said he often charges about \$5 per square foot to remove the insulation, but that is only the tip of the iceberg.

Added costs include consultants who take air samples for testing and separate charges for safe and legal disposal. In some cases, additional cleanup is needed, which also increases costs.

What if I have disturbed my insulation?

Moving the insulation can disturb asbestos fibers and once airborne, they may have been inhaled. The fibers may not have gotten into your lungs, but it is possible that they did. Some people exposed to asbestos never develop the diseases it can cause. In those who do, the symptoms can take 10 to 30 years to develop. People who are concerned about possible exposure should consult a physician who specializes in lung diseases.

If I have insulation that has asbestos, how can I reduce my exposure?

Leave the insulation alone. Asbestos is a problem if it becomes airborne. So avoid disturbing the material. Don't store items in the

attic.

What if I want to remodel my house and the insulation needs to be removed?

If the insulation has been tested and contains asbestos, a trained, certified asbestos contractor should replace it. The DEQ can confirm the credentials of certified asbestos removal professionals. In Great Falls, Quality Urethane is a qualified contractor.

Insulation is not the only product in your home that may contain asbestos, which is added to some products as a fire retardant, for example. Homeowners should educate themselves about all types of asbestos-related products before beginning work themselves. Even those who hire a contractor should learn about asbestos, because they will want to make sure the contractor takes appropriate precautions. Although the DEQ runs education programs for contractors, officials say many are unaware of the risks.

If I have asbestosis, is there anything I can do?

Michael Spence, state medical officer with the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, recommends that those with asbestosis stop smoking immediately. Smoking greatly adds to the impact of the disease. Regular exercise also is advised.

Who can I contact to find out more about Zonolite insulation and products with asbestos in it?

■ State of Montana Department of Environmental Quality Asbestos Control Program:
(406) 444-2690
(406) 444-1436
www.deq.state.mt.us/pcd/

■ Environmental Protection Agency Toxic Substances Information Service, Asbestos Line:
(800) 471-7127

■ EPA Asbestos Ombudsman:
(800) 368-5888
www.epa.gov/asbestos/

■ Occupational Safety and Health Administration:
www.osha.gov/SLTC/asbestos/

■ Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry: www.atsdr.cdc.gov

■ National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health:
www.cdc.gov/niosh/homepage.html

■ Consumer Product Safety Commission:
www.cpsc.gov